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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

JULY 1st, 1865.

THE HANDEL FESTIVAL.

THE passion for sacred music, which has now so thoroughly taken possession of the English people, seems a fact so universally admitted by those who have the direction of our periodical gatherings for the performance of the greatest musical works, that compositions of a secular character appear to be tacitly considered inadmissible. Those imperishable Oratorios in which genius has glorified the words already sanctified in holy Writ, seem the fittest works for a Christian nation to throw its heart into on these occasions; and perhaps no finer spectacle can be witnessed in England than when thousands of people are congregated together with the one object of giving the utmost effect to those colossal choruses of Handel which, after the lapse of upwards of a century, stand alone and unapproachable in their sublimity and grandeur.

The real love for the sacred compositions of the great masters—even of our own Handel—amongst the middle classes is, however, of very recent date. When we remember the state of ignorance on the subject, even at the time the “Oratorio Concerts” at Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatres were first projected; when the “Ancient Concerts” attempted feebly to uphold the cause to the exclusive few, and the Royal Society of Musicians gave its performance of the “Messiah,” as the sacred musical event of the year, it must be obvious that some extraordinary influence must have been exerted to effect so important a change in so short a period.

That this great power was the establishment of the Sacred Harmonic Society can scarcely be for a moment doubted. Founded in the year 1832, it commenced its operations in the Lower Hall, Exeter Hall, creeping gradually into notice for the first few years, until in 1836 the first performance of the Society took place in the Large Hall; and from that date, it may be said to have formed one of the institutions of the country, spreading a love for sacred music not only throughout England, but indirectly inciting musical enthusiasts in the colonies to form similar societies for the performance of works which had been sealed to the masses for years.

The statistics of the performances given by this Society in the recently published report, are exceedingly interesting, as showing the relative popularity of the composers whose works have been given. It is stated that since 1836, 463 concerts have taken place in Exeter Hall. Of these 463 concerts, 231 (or half the entire number) have been devoted to the Oratorios and other important works of Handel. Mendelssohn's compositions have formed either the entire or principal feature of 132 concerts; and it has been lately seen that the sacred music of Spohr is likely at length to take as permanent a place in the Society's repertoire as the works of either the composers already mentioned.

But in tracing the cause of the widely spread love for sacred music, it must be remembered that Novello's cheap series of Oratorios not only supplied the demand which was caused by the constant performance of these works, but actually created a public of its own, by circulating, at the price of a common-place ballad, the entire Oratorios amongst the audience; so that,

not only were they enabled to follow every note during the representation of the works, but a library of standard sacred compositions was almost unconsciously formed in thousands of homes, leading in a short time to the establishment of private and public choral societies, which have increased and strengthened year by year.

Although the influence of the Sacred Harmonic Society has been extremely beneficial to the cause of sacred music from its formation in 1832, there can be little doubt that its power has been enormously increased since Mr. Costa has taken the direction of its affairs. Not only has he laboured hard to give the greatest effect to all the performances of the society, but his indefatigable exertions in training a permanent choir, available at any moment to undertake the most abstruse compositions, cannot be too highly commended; and although it must have been long considered a reproach that London had no periodical musical Festival, like Birmingham, Norwich, Hereford, Gloucester, and Worcester, we question whether this slur would even now have been effectually removed had it not been for the personal energy and perseverance of Mr. Costa.

The experiment of a Handel Festival was gently tried in 1857, at the Crystal Palace; for with such an enormous outlay, it was necessary to feel the way very gradually before the Sacred Harmonic Society committed itself boldly to a triennial performance. The success of the undertaking however was so decisive that all doubt upon the matter was at once dispelled; and the performances of '59 and '62 have amply proved that the result may now be confidently relied upon.

The directors of the Crystal Palace having so energetically co-operated with the Sacred Harmonic Society in carrying out all the minute details connected with the Festival, it is scarcely to be wondered at that this triennial musical meeting should take place in a building so admirably adapted to accommodate the thousands of people who are attracted by so magnificent a performance. No doubt, acoustics has its fixed laws, which cannot be put aside by any amount of enthusiasm; but a demonstration of so gigantic a nature requires a building of commensurate proportions; and we may conscientiously say that everything has been done on the present occasion to remedy the defects inseparable from the performance of such an enormous body of voices in a space not originally constructed for music. The programme lately issued by the Crystal Palace Company, tells us that it has taken three Festivals to complete the great orchestra, with its vast roof twice the diameter of the dome of St. Paul's; and that the number of executants falls little short of four thousand; statistics which must at once prove that the immense area required for the present Festival can be found nowhere but at the Crystal Palace, where beauty of structure, light and air, combine to give a cheerfulness to the scene which could never be found in a metropolitan concert-room, however colossal might be its dimensions. Without pausing to consider whether these periodical Festivals should be exclusively devoted to the compositions of Handel—a question, however, which we think worthy of consideration—there can be little doubt that, admitting the fact, the selection made for the three days' performance is the very best that could be devised. The *Messiah*, that deeply religious poem, which must ever retain its place in all English musical Festivals, has a right to take the lead, not only at the head of Handel's works, but at the head of all performances

where sacred music is to form the distinguishing feature. Then for the next great Oratorio, which shall prove how masses of individuals can unite under one directing mind to interpret the most gigantic specimens of choral writing ever conceived, no work can be found like *Israel in Egypt*, a composition, the intricate beauties of which the Sacred Harmonic Society may certainly claim to have educated the people to appreciate. The middle day between the performances of these two Oratorios is devoted to a selection from the works of Handel, in which, in addition to the compositions which the general public always expects to hear, several pieces not so well known are given, with the intention of showing the universality of the composer's genius. The day fixed for this selection, the 28th of June, being the anniversary of Her Majesty's Coronation, the great Coronation Anthem, *Zadok the Priest*, appropriately forms a portion of the performance.

The facilities afforded by the railway companies offer such inducements to lovers of music to attend the Festival, that it may well be termed a national undertaking, as excursion tickets to London and back, covering the three days of the performances, are issued for distances exceeding thirty miles from the metropolis; and in order to give ample time for the visitors to reach the palace without inconvenience, the hour for commencing has been changed from one o'clock to three. This we think an exceedingly judicious alteration, as many clergymen living at a distance who are anxious to attend the performance of the *Messiah*, have hitherto been prevented by its commencing at so early an hour on Monday.

It would be difficult, and, indeed, needless, to offer any words of commendation on the genius which Handel has thrown into his grand Christian Oratorio, the *Messiah*. That it was a labour of love is everywhere apparent from the spontaneousness with which such divine melodies as "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and "He shall feed His flock," seem to flow naturally from the words; whilst the choruses "For unto us a child is born," and the "Hallelujah,"—although many in *Israel in Egypt* may surpass them in intricacy of design and masterly handling of the separate parts—are, without doubt, the highest specimens of jubilant thankfulness ever offered by man to his Creator.

Of the general execution of this Oratorio on the opening day of the Festival it would be impossible to speak too highly. Few persons would go to the Handel Festival to pass a severe critical judgment on the solos—the immense space necessary for the due effect of the choruses preventing even the finest voices from reaching the auditors with sufficient tone to satisfy the ear—but many of the principal airs were on this occasion given with more success than we remember at any similar performance at the Crystal Palace. Madlle. Adelina Patti had already shown at the Birmingham Festival how much real feeling she possessed for sacred music; and although the immense area at Sydenham seems to demand the power of Madlle. Titiens, we had in its place a simplicity and purity of vocalization admirably adapted to the devotional melodies of the *Messiah*. That calmness and freedom from the slightest tinge of theatrical effect, which can only be obtained by constant practice in Oratorios, could scarcely, perhaps, at present be expected from one who nightly wins the most enthusiastic demonstrations of approval from the audience at the Royal Italian Opera: but we have hope in her future; for versatility—which is the surest sign of a great

artist—is possessed in an eminent degree by Madlle. Patti, and we have little doubt that she may eventually achieve a name as great in sacred, as she has already done in secular music. The florid portions of the air "Rejoice greatly" were thrown off with the ease to which Madlle. Patti has accustomed us; but the words "and he shall speak peace unto the heathen," seemed wanting in that deep feeling which is required as a contrast. In the beautiful air "I know that my Redeemer liveth," passing over the hesitation in one bar, she sang in her very best style, and with an expression that proved she had thoroughly studied the meaning of the words. As an acknowledged favorite of the public, she was received with the warmest applause; and never did an artist more conscientiously strive to win it. Madame Lemmens-Sherrington was eminently successful in her solos, her clear voice penetrating every portion of the concert-room. The soprano solo, "Take his yoke upon you," (which forms the second verse of "He shall feed his flock") was most exquisitely delivered; and we can scarcely say, in the trial of strength between *contralto* and *soprano*—which it appears this song is always in future to be—whether Madame Sainton-Dolby or Madame Sherrington bore off the palm. The air "How beautiful are the feet" was most chastely rendered by Madame Sherrington; and the recitatives which fell to her share were carefully and earnestly sung. Madame Sainton-Dolby is so well known as a practised and thoroughly competent singer in sacred music that we need only say that she gave the whole of the *contralto* music in her usual admirable style, especially the air "He was despised," which lies excellently within her register; and the bass air, "But who may abide," which it now seems the universal custom to give to a *contralto*. The principal tenor part in the *Messiah* seems so identified with Mr. Sims Reeves, that a great performance of the Oratorio would appear almost incomplete without him. There are few singers who have so thoroughly caught the Handelian feeling as Mr. Reeves, as his delivery of the opening recitative and air "Comfort ye," and "Every valley" will amply prove, even to those whose memory can carry them back to the best days of Braham. His recitative is as fine a specimen of pure English elocution as we ever listened to; and as he does not allow himself to be betrayed into the fatal error of displaying his voice at the expense of the composer, the listener is never checked in that devotional feeling which Handel's music, purely interpreted, never fails to produce. As an instance of the manner in which he reserves his voice for the power which is imperatively called for, we may instance the air "Thou shalt break them," in which the words "Thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" were declaimed with a force which proves that the upper notes of his register are fully at his command whenever he requires them. Mr. Santley's fine voice was heard to great advantage in the vigorous air "Why do the nations;" and Mr. Weiss sang carefully the recitative and air "For behold darkness," and "The people that walked," but with a tameness which too often mars some of his best vocal efforts. The playing of Mr. Harper in the trumpet obbligato of the air "The trumpet shall sound" (sung by Mr. Santley), was as usual one of the features of the Oratorio; but we cannot reconcile ourselves to the omission of the second part of this air, in B minor, thoroughly settled though it may be by custom. We have a recollection of its performance in its entire state at the last Hereford Festival;

and we have no hesitation in saying that Handel knew what he meant best.

The chorus singing was, on the whole, so uniformly good, that we should do an injustice to Mr. Costa were we not to award him unqualified praise for his exertions. That a certain amount of unsteadiness is occasionally apparent to the listeners is not to be wondered at when we consider that, were it even possible to make four thousand people go together like a machine, it would be utterly impossible for such accuracy to reach the audience. Such gigantic effects as can be gained by the united efforts of an enormous body of voices, therefore, must be accepted as a compensation for that precision which might be gained in a smaller space; and, viewed in this light, we question whether such chorus singing has ever been heard before. The first chorus, "And the glory of the Lord," was a marvel of musical organization; and, indeed, was one of the most perfect specimens of choral singing in the Oratorio. The subjects were given by the several departments of the choir with immense precision; and the *altos*, especially, were remarkably firm throughout. The value of mere numbers in Handel's grandest choruses was never perhaps more fully shown than in "For unto us a child is born." Familiar as this is to an English audience, the effect is always equally grand and impressive; and, with the exception of its performance at the last Birmingham Festival,—a sensation which still lingers in our memory—we have never heard it so well sung. Whether Mr. Costa, with the huge mass of executants before him, found it impossible to adhere to his usual method of whispering the opening part, and reserving all power for the words "Wonderful Counsellor," or whether he has thought better of it, and kept operative effects for the Opera-house, we know not; but certainly the chorus was immensely improved by following the score as Handel wrote it. An enthusiastic *encore*, which could not be resisted, rewarded the choir for this fine performance. The "Hallelujah" Chorus was given with extraordinary vigour and precision; and, indeed, the choral forces were thoroughly efficient throughout the entire work, every point being taken up with a firmness which could only be obtained by a perfect system of training, and a resolution to yield implicit obedience to the conductor. Previous to the Oratorio, the National Anthem was excellently sung, first by the *Soprani*, then by the *Alti*, and afterwards in full chorus.

A demonstration on so gigantic a scale as this Festival is not to be judged solely in a musical point of view. Looking from the vast orchestra, filled with the most talented executants from all parts of the kingdom, we behold an immense area, in which every available space is occupied by an audience, whose attention is as much rivetted on the music as those whose duty it is to interpret it. No ardent worshipper of the art should underrate the significance of such a fact. The love of Handel's Oratorios has sunk deeply into the hearts of English people; and the *Messiah* is so regarded as an earnest outpouring of Christian joy and hopefulness that those who listen feel that they are participators in the realization of the work itself; and hence a bond of union is established between audience and artists. Thus indeed should it ever be with the undying creations of genius; for, as true religion makes converts wherever its pure doctrines are felt, so should true art draw within its magic influence the sympathies of the people, until all are made to feel that the worship of such works should be not partial, but universal.

It is with this view that we gladly welcome such popular gatherings as the Handel Festival; and the magnificent result of the first day's performance affords undoubted proof not only of the enormous amount of executive talent which can be assembled at one time by a duly organized system, but of the intense desire with the public to seize every opportunity of hearing those compositions, the passion for which is deepening as a knowledge of them increases.

Of the Wednesday and Friday representations we are at present unable to speak, as our number must be at press before the second day's performance; but we understand that the sale of tickets for both days has been immense; and there is every reason to believe that the Handel Festival of 1865 will be, both in an artistic and pecuniary sense, one of the most brilliant that has yet been given.

HER MAJESTY'S THEATRE.

THE character of *Medea* is so intimately associated with the name of Pasta, that many who were too young to be frequenters of the Opera at the time this great singer was in the zenith of her fame, have imagined that Madlle. Titiens had attempted, in this last revival of Cherubini's opera, to rival her predecessor in the same part. The *Medea* made famous by the genius of Madame Pasta is however a weak opera by Simone Mayer, written in the true Italian school, and now laid aside we hope for ever. Cherubini's *Medea* is a work of solid pretension; the composition of one who worked for art alone, and who has hitherto, therefore, been too exclusively the favourite of artists, seeing that scarcely any of his operas are at all known to the general public in England, very slightly in France (although *Medea* was originally written for that country), and not as much as they should be even in Germany. Madlle. Titiens is however likely to secure a permanent fame for Cherubini's work in England by her magnificent acting and singing in the principal character. Her performance of *Fidelio* had already prepared the public to expect a perfect realization of the Greek heroine; and we have little hesitation in saying that this, her latest assumption, is likely to prove her very best. The music is more trying than any of the screaming operas of the modern Italian school, because the dramatic energy to be infused into every bar is an integral portion of the composition itself; and no mere mistress of execution, therefore, dare attempt it. The declamatory portions of the opera were given with a fire and dramatic power which aroused the audience to positive enthusiasm; and the duet with *Jason* in the first act was a triumph of true musical art. Not only the highest vocal qualities, but positive physical powers are so severely taxed in the last act of this great musical tragedy, that even Madlle. Titiens, who seems whilst on the stage to show no symptom of exhaustion, must feel that the repetition of this opera ought not to be too frequent. No lover of the loftiest school of dramatic music should miss hearing a work which can only be supported by the untiring efforts of so consummate an artist as Madlle. Titiens; for we feel that such singers come but seldom, and the gap caused by their retirement is speedily filled by the many pretenders, whose appeal to the uneducated is too surely responded to.

Apart from the solo portions of this opera, the choral effects are so grand and impressive—so stately, forcible, and full of what may be called the cold beauty of Greek art, that we seem to live and move with the actors before us; and melody—such as we welcome in the modern *cantabile* operas—is not only unlooked for, but would be felt as a positive anachronism. Madlle. Titiens was most ably supported by Dr. Günz, who in the part of *Jason*, sang well the music allotted to him, and always with the feeling that he was adding to the effect of Cherubini's great work, rather than displaying his own powers to the best advantage. The same may be said of Mr. Santley, whose *Creon* is a noble instance of devotion to art for its own sake. The music scarcely lies well for his voice; but he threw his whole energy into the part; and every phrase was delivered with a thorough knowledge of the intention of the composer. The character of *Dirce* was quite beyond the very limited powers of Miss Laura Harris; but *Neris* found a most efficient representative in Madlle. Sinico. The chorus was the finest we have ever heard in this establishment—especially in the nuptial scene—and the band was in every respect fully equal to the difficult music of this trying but noble specimen of the lyric drama.

ROYAL ITALIAN OPERA.

DONIZETTI's Opera *Linda di Chamounir* is so admirably suited to display both the vocal and histrionic powers of Madlle. Adelina Patti, that we think it likely to prove one of the most attractive of the lighter operas of the season. The grace and elegance which she throws into the character, seem so natural to the little peasant girl that, apart from the manner in which she executes the music, the drama at once carries the sympathies of the audience to the end; and the restoration of the heroine to reason and to happiness is felt as a real relief to those who have followed her through the vicissitudes of her career. Her interpretation of the music is irreplicable throughout: not only the brilliant passages in such solos as "O luce di quest'anima," but the more impassioned portions in the intensely dramatic situations with which the opera